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ABSTRACT

The writing lab at a Florida two-year technical institute is designed to help students fulfill the writing requirements for their technical degree programs. In the lab, developmental students take composition courses that may be substituted for traditionally required composition courses in their programs. Some students take additional writing courses for elective credits, while others receive assistance with specific writing projects on a drop-in basis. The lab staff consists of one full-time lab assistant and two teachers. There are no tutors, since most two-year students do not have the academic skills to tutor and will not be attending the institute long enough to warrant training in tutoring. The lab's primary materials are approximately 2,000 texts, as well as audiovisual materials spanning a variety of writing styles, objectives, and reading levels. Each student using the lab receives an individual diagnosis of writing competencies and needs and an individual program of study. Students' assignments concentrate on the mastery of only a small writing skill, and students must master one before moving to another. This individualized instruction, although both costly and demanding for teachers, is most effective in the lab. (HTH)

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THE WRITING LAB IN THE TWO-YEAR TECHNICAL INSTITUTE

The writing lab at Waukesha County Technical Institute, a two-year post-secondary school, was formed in 1974 by the Communication Skills Department. The lab was created because the composition teachers recognized that a significant number of the students in the traditional composition courses did not possess the basic writing skills which were a requisite for success in these required writing courses. Frustrated with their inability to meet course standards, such students typically dropped from the composition courses, with the result that they were then unable to meet the requirements of their technical degrees or their vocational diplomas. And so, they could not attain their career goals. Thus, the lab was created so that these students could be helped to fulfill their writing requisites for their programs and their degrees.

Funding

Because the type of student who was to be served in the writing lab was academically disadvantaged, WCTI applied

CS 207898

for and received federal funds through the Vocational Education Amendments Act for the Handicapped and Disadvantaged. Since 1974 these funds have been received and matched by the school. With these monies, the lab was established, materials purchased, and a full-time lab assistant and writing teachers were hired.

In the first full year, the budget for the writing lab was less than $20,000.00. Since then, due to the success of the writing lab, four other remedial labs (reading, math, GED and Adult Basic Education, and Special Needs) have been grouped with the writing lab into a Learning Center. The combined budget requests of this Learning Center for the 1979-80 school year totalled a quarter of a million dollars. Thus, the success of the writing lab opened the federal funds to the other remedial labs in the school.

Location

When it began in 1974, the writing lab was in a converted classroom. After just a semester it moved to a large, open area adjacent to sixteen General Education classrooms, and the basic traffic flow of General Education. As the reading, math, GED and Special Needs labs formed with the writing lab to create a Learning Center, the open classroom area was outgrown. In the fall of 1979 the entire Learning Center moved into the Resource Center Building where now it occupies a good one-third of the library floor space.

Component of Learning Center

The advantages of the writing lab being part of the entire Learning Center are many. Before the Center was formed, the writing lab was just one of five separate labs (writing, reading, math, GED, Special Needs) with five separate budgets, separate administrators, and separate policies. Yet, all these labs served much the same student population. Between the various instructors in the various labs there was a great lack of communication about the students' needs and the services the students were receiving. And, too, a great duplication of services existed, especially between the writing and reading labs, both of whom offered spelling, research skills, and study skills.

But of most concern to the writing lab instructors was the fact that the lab was the last hope for all the students who would be lost in the regular classes: the learning disabled; the hearing, sight and speech impaired; the quadraplegics; those learning English as a second language; and the mentally and emotionally handicapped. All these students came to the writing lab and to the writing instructors, most of whom lacked training in teaching these students.

Once the writing lab became part of the Learning Center, writing instructors could easily meet with the Special Needs instructors to see how best to teach these learning disabled and physically handicapped students. When necessary, the

Special Needs instructors took over the actual instruction of such students.

Also, with all the labs together there could be a greater flexibility and coordination in developing a program of study for students. More resources are available. A coordination between the various areas allows for coordinated diagnostic testing, planning, tutoring, and suggestions for teaching techniques especially for the handicapped and learning disabled. Teachers have immediate access to help and/or consultation. And the overlap between the reading and writing labs is easily worked out.

Thus the formation of the writing lab has been a developmental one: from a small classroom and tiny budget to a cornerstone of the Learning Center where it meets the needs of a tremendously diversified student population.

Operation

Students use the writing lab in one of three ways. Here developmental students take composition courses which may be substituted for traditional, required composition courses in their programs of study. Other students take additional writing courses for elective credits. And students drop in for assistance with writing projects.

Courses for Developmental Students

The primary reason for the writing lab is to assist those students who do not possess the minimal writing skills

necessary for academic success in the traditional composition courses. The problem at WCTI is to identify such students before they experience failure. WCTI is an open-entry open-exit school which has a philosophy of "no placement testing." Consequently, the only placement tools are the high school transcripts. Since these are usually inadequate, the writing lab instructors created their own diagnostic placement tools for identifying the students who will have trouble in regular courses. One such diagnostic tool is a 100-point objective test which is taken by students on the first day of all composition courses; the other is a writing sample which all students do the second day of class. (The content, makeup and validity of these tests will be explained later in this paper.)

After seven years of testing and validating these tools, the writing instructors are fairly sure that most students who achieve lower than 50 correct on the 100-point diagnostic will have a very difficult time in regular courses and will probably drop out. However, in order doubly to check the validity of this score, we do two holistic readings of each of the writing samples of all the writing students. Teachers read the papers asking three questions: Does the paper have a main point? Is the main point developed? Does the student write in complete sentences? If any one of these three points is answered by "no," the student's paper is checked

on the back by the first reader so the second reader does not know if the paper has already been checked, and on the front by the second reader.

Students who receive checks from both readers of the writing samples, or one check and a score less than 50 on the 100-point diagnostic, are recommended to the writing lab. These students can take their required courses through the lab for credit, but the course has a special number and is marked "Basic" on the transcript.

Although many people wonder whether credits should be offered through the lab, our experience shows that it is a viable method for our school. It works because in the lab the student/teacher ratio is twelve to one or less. Each student receives an individualized course tailored to remediate his individual writing problems. Each student learns the skills he must know in order to achieve his own academic goals.

We know from experience that the majority of these students are potential drop-outs. But when these students are assigned to the lab where the writing course is designed specifically to meet the needs of each student, we have about 90% student retention and completion of the courses.

Elective Courses

In addition to taking required composition courses through the lab, students may also use the lab to earn up to six elective credits. This service fills the need of those

students who do not fit into any of the regular composition courses being offered at the school. They may be transitional students such as displaced homemakers who are tentatively trying school for the first time in years. They may be new students who recognize their own lack of basic skills and wish to improve their writing before entering a program.

Self-Assessment of Writing Skills

Often these students register for developmental work in the lab as a result of taking a writing self-assessment which is sent by the school to all prospective students. The school encourages all students to take this voluntary self-assessment before registering for any courses.

The self-assessment was created by the writing lab instructors. It is a unique part of our writing program, one unavailable at most other schools.

The purpose of the self-assessment is to let the students know whether or not they have the basic skills expected of them at entrance into specific programs.

In order to develop the writing self-assessment, the writing lab instructors created a list of all the competencies which we thought were essential to entrance into program courses. We then asked all the instructors in the various programs in the school to identify the writing competencies which a beginning student would need in their program. Using these results, the writing teachers created instruments to

measure the student's level of achievement of these competencies. Scores which indicated competency levels were then determined for the various programs. Finally these assessments were tested and validated.

Consequently, now a student can self-assess his own writing skills on a voluntary, self-correcting, self-interpreting instrument before entering a program.

Many students discover through this self-assessment that their skills are not adequate for the program of their choice. So they enter the writing lab for developmental course work worth elective credits either before beginning a program or simultaneous with beginning one.

These elective writing lab courses are a fine transitional type of course for those who are returning to school after long years because here the students are given individual attention as they begin to grow accustomed to academic life.

Other types of students who use the lab for elective credit are already in business or industry. These students desire a specialized type of business or report writing course. Another kind of student wishing elective credit has passed all the traditional writing courses in the school but wishes more expertise. Other students come to the lab if they have failed entrance requirements to four-year colleges. Senior citizens come to write. So do the faculty who are publishing, or preparing to publish, and members of the

secretarial staff of the school who want to enhance their writing skills.

Drop-In Service

The third service of the writing lab is the drop-in service. Many students wish assistance on a project or assignment but do not wish to take an entire course. We help them, also. And we reach beyond the student here, too, to assist the secretarial staff, instructors, and administration with their questions and their problems about writing.

Approximately 1,500 people use the drop-in service each semester; about 120 receive credit for courses.

Staff

The staff of the writing lab is comprised of one full-time lab assistant and two teachers. Although the lab assistant when he was hired possessed only a B.A., he is now a M.A. candidate. Among his duties are the following: registering credit students for specified hours and teachers, diagnostic testing of all students, record keeping, A-V materials upkeep, replacement of all perishable materials and handouts, initial handling of all drop-ins, opening and closing of the lab, supervised instruction of students, and continuity in the lab since he is the only full-time personnel.

In addition to the lab assistant, two instructors of writing from the Communication Skills Department teach in the lab a combined total of 25-35 hours per week. Each

instructor is assigned a certain number of students and meets with them at specific, assigned hours of the week. Students in three-credit courses must work in the lab with a teacher at least three hours a week. The instructor's role is to diagnose each student's competencies and weaknesses, to prescribe an individualized course of study for each student, and to evaluate each student's attainment of competencies in the light of the student's academic goals.

The writing instructor and the lab assistant work with other instructors in the Learning Center to meet the special needs of the learning disabled or the handicapped. The writing instructors and the lab assistant also teach some traditional composition courses so they are aware of the competencies demanded in regular composition courses and have a basis of comparison for the achievement of the writing lab students.

A secretary, shared with the entire Learning Center staff, is a receptionist and typist.

Tutors

The writing lab has no tutors for several reasons: in a technical school many students attend only one year in order to get a diploma; many of the two-year associate degree students do not have the academic skills to be tutors. The effort of identifying, training and supervising tutors for what might be only one semester of service has not seemed

merited. Also, the budget has not allowed the hiring of tutors from outside the technical school community.

We believe that we have eased the problem of no tutors in several ways: the full-time lab assistant is well educated in the teaching of writing and has been able to accommodate the needs of the drop-ins; tutors exist in the area of special needs for the handicapped and learning disabled through the Special Needs services of the Learning Center.

Use of Materials

Our primary materials are the 2,000 or so texts in the writing lab. These books span a variety of writing styles, objectives, and reading levels. Some are traditional rhetorics, but the majority are geared to the kinds of students who need the lab. Thus we have workbooks, prose readers, business writing texts, journalism texts, grammars, and a variety of books for specialized learning such as sentence combining. We use some programmed materials, but find that texts with answer keys work just as well as the programmed materials.

Our audio-visual collection fills several six-foot high cabinets. But we have found that A-V materials work best with our students when the materials are supplementary to specific units or are an alternative teaching device. About three or four years ago we depended heavily on such A-V materials, but we have found that most students preferred

and learned more from the constant analysis of their own writings, the texts, and frequent interactions with the teachers and lab assistant.

The basic developmental students are required to purchase a text, Grassroots, by Susan Fawcett and Alvin Sandberg, Houghton-Mifflin publisher, or Writing with Confidence by Alan Meyers, published by Scott-Foresman and Company. We look very favorably on the new text, Evergreen, by the authors of Grassroots. All other students use a wide variety of materials available to them in the lab. These materials are carded and can be checked out.

Each student who uses the lab receives an individual diagnosis of his writing competencies and needs and an individual program of study. Thus it is necessary to recommend the specific materials to each student from which he can learn reasonably well, and with which he is reasonably comfortable. Often, in fact, to teach a specific competency we prescribe three texts in ascending difficulty and expect the students to work through the competency in each text. Often, too, we give the students a choice of materials, telling them they can learn the concept in any of a variety of methods -- programmed instruction, workbooks, a rhetoric text, or an A-V presentation. We allow the students to choose first the method of presentation and later the reading level of the presentation. Students, thus, feel a responsibility for

their choice of learning method as well as for the content of the learning. Although some students find this decision-making frustrating, we believe it is worthwhile because it teaches the students about the process of learning as well as specific content competencies.

Teaching Techniques

The teaching technique in the lab is individualized instruction. Since the students in the lab are there to achieve a great variety of competencies -- from developmental English through business writing and preparation for manuscripts for publication -- it is almost impossible to teach in groups. Thus, although each teacher is assigned about ten students per hour, these students are taught individually.

We use a modified Garrison method for teaching writing. According to Roger Garrison, Westbrook College, Portland, Maine, a student is taught writing by writing and by the evaluation of that writing. The student learns through constant revision. Using this technique, instructors meet students in short conferences of only two to four minutes each. Thus the instructor can meet ten students an hour and see some students even twice. In such a conference the instructor evaluates the student's writing for only one or two specific writing tasks. Students' assignments concentrate on the mastery of only a small writing skill, manageable in

the specific writing level of each student. As the students master that skill they are led to another.

How do we know which skills a student possesses? The diagnostic 100-point test created by the writing lab instructors and given to all students is designed so that an item analysis will point out a student's competencies in three areas. These are sentence structure, grammar and usage, and mechanics. The sentence structure unit specifically identifies the student's competencies or problems with the whole sentence, fragments, run-ons, coordination, subordination, emphasis, and parallel structure. The grammar and usage unit identifies eight competencies, some of which are verb tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement and consistency, and misplaced modifiers. The mechanics section identifies the traditional competencies in punctuation. Students also do a writing sample as a second part of this diagnostic process. The students' competencies with main ideas, development and unity are evident in these writing samples.

After the students take the two diagnostics and both have been analyzed by the teacher, each student meets with the instructor. The teacher asks about the student's educational objectives, and the teacher and student together work out a plan for the accomplishment of specific writing competencies.

In the actual teaching hour the teacher meets each student once (perhaps more times) to check progress, answer questions, evaluate learning, assign the next writing project or text, change the learning materials if they are not meeting the needs of the student, and, most important, motivate.

Records are kept on each student so that the staff knows instantly the exact competency the student is working on, the materials being used, and the assignment being performed. Also kept for each student are diagnostic results, attendance, and competency completions or test scores.

Evaluation

Such a teaching method is costly. Yet, we know from experience that the majority of students who are assigned to the writing lab because of their low diagnostic scores would be the traditional drop-out. In the lab, we retain 90% of these students. Thus the student does not drop because of his basic skills deficiencies. This is important because often, except for the basic skills, he is quite capable of succeeding in the program of his choice. Our school has evaluated its commitment to these students and decided that the cost of the individualized labs is well worth the retention and graduation of such students.

Other considerations for such a lab revolve around the teachers. Because of the intense level of concentration required with each individual student, and the tremendous

disparity in writing skill and learning styles of the students, it is a rare teacher who can sustain, on a continous basis year in and year out, the level of intensity needed to operate such a lab. Most teachers relish the breather that teaching in the regular classroom gives them.

It is important that teachers who work in this type of lab understand and enjoy the individualized method of instruction. They should have experience in working with the academically disadvantaged and experience in teaching composition, so they have a variety of materials and methods to use with students. Particularly important, this type of lab instructor should enjoy the special strengths of the returning, older adult who needs the individualized encouragement that such an instructor and lab setting can give.

Also, it is good not to allow the lab to establish a reputation as the place for the dummies, the failures, the incompetent. This appellation can be avoided by encouraging everyone to use the lab, at least on a drop-in basis. This includes the president, the staff, and the best students. When students see their own teachers and the school president in the lab, they understand the ability of the lab to serve "everybody."

Perhaps that "everybody" designates the lab's power and its potential for creating its own demise. It cannot be all things to all men. In trying to do so, it may wear out

its staff and diffuse its efforts. Yet as a lab serves almost "everybody," at least to the extent that the energy of its personnel and the diversity and availability of its resources will allow, it will be a vital service for the entire academic community. Among those most grateful will be the students who could not have survived academic life without it.